

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: The "Signal" Aspects of Bombing

1. There are at least two dimensions -- military and political -- to any act or pattern of bombing attacks against North Vietnam, and hence to any decision on whether or not to authorize any particular strike or series of strikes. The military dimension involves the effect a particular strike or strike series will have on North Vietnam's strategic or tactical capabilities. The political dimension involves the effect of a particular strike or attack pattern on the enemy's will or on his political calculations which, in turn, affect his strategic decisions. A given attack may be of great military value but little immediate political consequence. Conversely, an attack or attack series with very little real military significance can have considerable political impact.
2. These considerations are directly germane to the question of bombing North Vietnam above the 19th parallel; to the particular matter of hitting selected targets between the 19th and 20th parallel; and the more general issue of overall bombing policy. This memorandum will ignore the military considerations involved and focus on certain aspects of the political dimension of this question.
3. Hanoi's negotiators came to Paris questing, at least initially, for success rather than settlement. Hanoi presently regards the Paris talks as a new front of revolutionary struggle more than a vehicle for finding a compromise solution with which both sides can live. The actions of Hanoi's negotiators are aimed at a double audience: international, particularly US, opinion and the South Vietnamese, both in and out of government. In playing to the international/US gallery, Hanoi hopes to be able to encourage a coalescence or fusion of hopes for peace and opposition to the war in a manner that will generate political pressures on Washington sufficient to force the US Government's hand. In playing to the South Vietnamese, Hanoi hopes to be able to use the fact of bilateral US/DRV talks, in the context of already widespread South Vietnamese nervousness and suspicion, as an added element of political pressure on the South Vietnamese governmental structure.

4. Hanoi's play of its negotiating hand has, so far, been obdurate. Hanoi is insisting on a total ("unconditional") cessation of US bombing and "all other acts of war" (including reconnaissance) without any element of promised reciprocity on the part of the North Vietnamese. Hanoi almost certainly now calculates that if it stonewalls long enough the political pressure on the US Government will eventually reach the point where it will be forced to make some substantive concessions, to be "forthcoming" in order to get the talks moving and avoid the obloquy of being held responsible for their failure or rupture. Hanoi also is well aware that any such unrequited US concessions would send spasms of concern throughout South Vietnam.

5. Hanoi's current political calculations and, hence, the way it is playing its negotiating hand, are probably heavily influenced by an additional judgment: that the process of partial de-escalation initiated by and enunciated in President Johnson's 31 March speech is, for practical political purposes, virtually irreversible.

6. The above considerations bear directly on the political dimension of the bombing issue. A generalized resumption of bombing over all of North Vietnam would almost certainly confound Hanoi's political calculations, but would obviously also have considerable political fallout internationally and within the US. Even a generalized resumption of continuing attacks between the 19th and 20th parallel would now probably produce a diluted variant of essentially the same political result. Selected attacks or concentrated attack series on specific targets between the 19th and 20th parallels -- e.g. Bai Thuong Airfield -- would probably have a rather different effect. If the attacks were concentrated on specific targets whose current use made it clear that Hanoi was not matching US restraint and if the attacks were surgical rather than generalized, Hanoi would probably find itself forced to review the bidding on the irreversibility of US de-escalation and on its assessment of the political constraints under which Washington felt itself to be operating. Such a bidding review could materially influence the subsequent play of Hanoi's negotiating hand in Paris.